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ABSTRACT

As part of a series of documents on assessment of student learning in various school curriculum areas, this report describes assessment of student learning in the foreign language classroom in South Carolina. The report begins with an overview of current curriculum goals in foreign language education and the status of assessment practices in this area. Subsequent sections describe methods of assessing foreign language learning in the following five areas: (1) listening; (2) speaking; (3) reading; (4) writing; and (5) culture. The manner in which curriculum, instruction, and assessment are combined and the relative interest in each differ by grade level. In elementary school foreign language programs, class time is devoted to the development of listening, speaking, and culture skills, with few tests being given. Many current developments in foreign language assessment are taking place at the secondary school level or higher. Performance assessment approaches have already been established in foreign language education, while they are only beginning to have an impact in other fields. Educators with an interest in performance-based authentic assessment have much to gain from a careful study of foreign language assessment. Contains 48 references. (SLD)

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ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGAUGE

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South Carolina Center for Excellence in the Assessment of Student Learning

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Foreword

This report is part of a series of documents prepared by the South Carolina Center for Excellence in the Assessment of Student Learning (CEASL) to describe assessment of student learning in various school curriculum areas, prekindergarten through grade twelve. The focus of this document is assessment of student learning in the foreign language classroom. The report begins with an overview of current curriculum goals in foreign language education and the status of assessment practices therein. The subsequent sections describe methods of assessing foreign language learning in each of five skill areas.

The South Carolina Center for Excellence in the Assessment of Student Learning was established by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and is supported by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education and the College of Education, University of South Carolina. The purpose of this Center is to increase awareness among teacher-educators of recent efforts to change approaches used to assess students' learning in pre-school through high school, and to encourage and support efforts to enhance training in testing, measurement and the assessment of students' learning for preservice educators. The Center is based on the educational philosophy that the fair, accurate and informative assessment of students' learning is an integral part of the teaching-learning process.

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Comments or suggestions concerning the information in this report are welcome and may be directed to the authors at the Center.

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Foreign Language Curriculum Trends and Goals

Foreign Language instruction in the United States has traditionally existed at the high school and college levels, with focus on European languages (i.e. French, German, Latin, & Spanish). The Joint National Committee for Languages (1991) reports that for many school systems, these languages are studied for two years at the high school level if the learner is college bound and one year at an institution of Higher Education. When the term "foreign language" is used in the literature it refers to the teaching of a "non-native language outside of the country or speech community where it is commonly spoken." Another term, "second language," refers to, "non-native language learning that takes place within one of the speech communities where that language is traditionally used" (Freed, 1991, p.6). Freed reports that these terms are often used synonymously by language professionals, even though their definitions reflect distinct differences.

Over the last decade, foreign language education has been experiencing a national revolution at all levels of schooling. Concern about young Americans' ability to survive and compete "globally" has been a driving force behind changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in the field (South Carolina Department of Education, 1992; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Simon, 1980; President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, 1979). Emphasis on Foreign Language Education has also been supported by research that suggests a link between the study of foreign languages and increased student performance on standardized basic-skills tests, critical thinking skills, self-esteem and creativity (Curtain & Pesola, 1988; South Carolina Department of Education, 1992).

In many cases the reaction to the national concern about global competence has led states to adopt policies, mission statements, or "Frameworks" for the implementation of K-12 Foreign Language education (e.g., South Carolina Department of Education, 1992; Joint National Committee for Languages, 1991). At the local level, school systems have initiated the study of Foreign Language in elementary grades because they recognize the benefits of the study of a second language at an early age (Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

Early foreign language study can take several different forms. The title "Foreign Language in the Elementary School" (FLES) refers to offering study in a single language in sessions taught by a language specialist that occur on a regular weekly or daily basis. Foreign Language Experience or FLEX programs offer experiences with one or more language(s) to develop interest and cultural awareness rather than fluency in the language(s). A program of complete "immersion" in a foreign language occurs when one or several of the traditional elementary school subjects are taught in the foreign language. Experts agree that articulation or coordination across levels of elementary and secondary education in foreign language dramatically affects the ultimate success of a foreign language program (Lange, 1982; Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

The results of the sixth annual survey of the status of foreign language education in the United States is reported in Dreams, Realities and Nightmares (Joint National Committee for Languages, 1991). The survey found that the implementation of foreign language programs which match the goals for foreign language study developed at the 1989 Education Summit vary greatly from one school district to another, depending upon the availability of qualified foreign language teachers and additional education funding.

Overview of Assessment in Foreign Language

Assessment of learning outcomes for student performance in foreign language study are traditionally related to the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and culture. Two distinct forms of traditional tests are used as the basis for the assessment of foreign language student learning, "discrete point tests" and "integrative tests". Discrete point tests focus on a single skill area and evaluate the knowledge of details of a language (e.g., the breadth and accuracy of the student's command of linguistic elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and structures). In contrast, global or integrative tests are broader and examine some combination of skill areas and measure the student's ability to understand and use language in context. (Rivers, 1981; Cohen, 1980; Valette, 1981).

Recent developments by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) have resulted in the development of a series of language tests. Language tests, have emerged as part of the "ACTFL Test Development Project," are intended to assess oral proficiency, listening, and reading skill of higher education students. They are used for periodic proficiency evaluation of students who might be pursuing teacher certification in foreign language or to assess applicants for various jobs requiring language proficiency (Byrnes & Canale, 1987). Byrnes and Canale also identify the 1986 "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines" as the definitive statement about assessment in foreign languages.

The focus on speaking ability or oral proficiency has been a stimulus in the area of assessment since the development in 1985 of the "Oral Proficiency Interview" by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the Educational Testing Service (Magnan, 1985; Byrnes, H. & Canale, M., 1987; Armengol & Manley, 1984; Hill & Mosher, 1989). An interview format is used to access the speaking ability of an interviewee. Progressively more difficult questions are posed by an interviewer who is accompanied by a rater. The rater uses a rubric, with a scale of zero to five, based on specific characteristics of speaking ability. ACTFL supervises the certification and training of interviewers and raters.

The Oral Proficiency Interview is an example of a performance-based assessment in Foreign Languages. The standardized assessment is conducted to determine the oral language proficiency of an individual and occurs in the context of a face-to-face interview (Armengol & Manley, 1984). Byrnes and Canale (1987) describe the interview as follows:

> the well-conducted interview does not proceed in a linear fashion through a prepared course of interrogation. Rather, the process is most easily depicted by an ever-broadening spiral through which the interview passes, probing higher and/or receding in response to the candidate's performance; dipping back to topic areas exposed by the candidate to broaden them, branching from them, and exploring task performance through them. (p.54)

The reading or listening assessment of an individual, based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, is also rated on a zero to five point scale (p. 335). The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines give generic descriptions of writing skills in a target language.

The development of ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines has evoked considerable controversy and discussion about their appropriateness and usefulness in the foreign language classroom (Byrnes & Canale, 1987; Hughes & Porter, 1983; Lowe & Stansfield, 1988; Mueller, 1980; Valdman, 1987; James, 1985; Higgs, 1982; Galloway, 1987; Halleck, 1992). The lack of national or statewide standards for foreign language education, at all grade levels, retards efforts to develop criteria for assessment of foreign language proficiency in classrooms (Lange, 1982; Joint National Committee for Languages, 1991). Gerard Ervin (1992), president of ACTFL, reported current issues in foreign language education and included proficiency guideline revision, student achievement goals, teacher education standards and the development of a written proficiency test as matters of concern (p. 335).

Authentic Assessment of Foreign Language Learning

Authentic assessment of some aspects of foreign language learning is conducted in the context of simulated conversations in the target language. Radio excerpts, speeches or performances in the target language are used to evaluate a learner's ability to hear and understand authentic sounds in the target language. Reading skills are measured by having learners read and demonstrate their comprehension of novels, advertisements, and news/magazine articles from target countries. Writing skills are judged through examination of letters to pen pals in target countries, personal journals, class newsletter articles or research papers. Assessment of a student's ability to appreciate the culture of a target population is accomplished through activities such as singing of authentic folk songs or by expressing perceptions of customs and traditions via actual photographs or advertisements. The power of authentic measures of student learning is that they bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world for which the learner is ultimately being prepared. The following sections of this paper describe assessment of knowledge and skill in foreign language listening, speaking, reading, writing and culture.

Assessment of Listening Skills

Assessment of listening ability requires the use of some indicators to show the student has heard what is said with some level of comprehension. Body movements, drawings, pictures and traslations are used to assess listening skills. Cloze Tests, which require the learner to replace words which have been omitted in aprescribed pattern in a passage, are also

used to assess the skills of a listener. The ability to discriminate sounds and more abstract aspects of listening comprehension must also be assessed. Other assessment approaches have been designed to consider these two domains in language proficiency.

Rebecca Valette's (1977), Modern Language Testing, documents a myriad of discrete point tests of listening skills which assist in the definition of assessment in foreign language listening skills. These tests include a language discrimination test, a "same vs. different" listening comprehension test, a test requiring identification of words that rhyme in the target language, listening tests that are devoted to verb forms in the target language, and tests to assess comprehension related to linear representation of intonation and meaning of intonation. Another dimension of listening skill, listening without understanding, can be evaluated through "elicited imitation" or repetition tasks (Oller & Perkins, 1980).

Global tests that evaluate listening comprehension of vocabulary in the target language can be presented in a "natural conversational framework," with student responses occurring in the form of body-movements, drawing, or conversation. Body-movement tests require that each student respond to spoken commands in the target language by doing whatever the tester says (Valette, 1977). Such tests are also known as "Total Physical Response" tests (Asher, 1986). For a "drawing test," the evaluator may say, "draw a green star if you are wearing white socks, an orange star if your socks are not white." If students correctly follow the directions given in the target language, then they understand the vocabulary and comprehend the meaning of the utterance. Listening-comprehension may also be assessed by having students react to a picture stimulus (Pino, 1988). "Picture tests can be used to [evaluate] whether the student understands the syntax and structure of the target language" (Valette, 1977). A tester can utter two different sentences for a particular picture that is being viewed by the student. The listener then indicates which utterance describes the picture most accurately.

Tests that integrate more than one skill in the foreign language can provide other opportunities for assessment of listening skills in an authentic context (Klein-Braley & Smith, 1985; Linder & Valette, 1979; Oller & Perkins, 1980, Oller, 1973). For example, a test of both listening and speaking skills may be conducted in the form of interpretation or translation between two monolinguals. This performance-based assessment is evaluated according to "literal translation...and transmission of message without intervening personally." Assessment of the communication skills of listening and writing can take the form of students writing answers to oral questions in the target language, or by filling in a weekly schedule given orally in the target language on a grid that has been provided to the listener. Following directions on a map is also a common authentic test of listening skills. Other approaches to assessing listening and other foreign language skills include listening to a taped telephone message and preparing a written message about it and taking notes or dictation on a short speech.

Assessment of Speaking Skills

Assessment in oral expression focuses on meaning rather than grammatical correctness. The basis for assessment of oral expression might be a student commentary based on pictures from magazines or newspapers or a description of an activity depicted in a picture. (Linder & Valette, 1979; Valette, 1981). Global language tests of listening and speaking may take the form of a directed conversation in which two students are given topics to speak about, but they must decide what to say about that topic. Tests of "free conversation" may include a role play of "finding your way in a big city" in which one student acts as a police officer with a map and another acts as a lost tourist (Linder & Valette, 1979). As in other disciplines, student self-assessment is encouraged in foreign language. One approach is to have students complete a form about their speaking ability reflecting on the effectiveness of their efforts at communication (Valette, 1981). Marlies Mueller (1987) indicates that,

> ...grades that reflect student progress [in oral skills] should be as descriptive as possible. An Oral Evaluation Form produced at Harvard University gives "overall comprehensibility and content a weight of 20% each and preparation of the assignment a weight of 10%. The component parts of comprehensibility are separately identified - pronunciation, intonation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency - and [each is] weighted at an additional 10% of the oral examination grade."

Mueller also cites "telephone tests" and authentic "short-wave radio broadcasts" as situations in which oral performance assessment can take place.

Pino (1987) describes oral testing in terms of "Ten Speaking Formats of Graduated Difficulty." This author recommends that oral evaluation might begin by having students make statements about their typical daily activities. Then, the more difficult task of reading a series of statements and then orally describing them in logical order is confronted. This is followed by interviews and situation role plays. A rubric for evaluating oral performance in terms of communication, accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation is provided.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) maintain that authentic tasks which reflect the ability to communicate ideas in specific life situations are important during the early stages of foreign language study. They prefer these to typical "discrete point" tests of pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. Other recommended authentic assessments of speaking skills include recorded conversations of pairs of students, narrations, formal speeches and debates.

The literature contains a variety of suggestions for authentic assessment of speaking skills in discrete point or integrated formats. Oller & Perkins (1980) present an "Oral Cloze Test" as a performance-based, discrete-point assessment of speaking skills. The assessment consists of students listening to a taped paragraph three times, after which they provide words in the target language that make sense in the space of the omitted words. Curtain & Pesola (1988) propose as "communicative" forms of assessment of speaking skills personal question-answer, dialogue, rejoinder, picture reaction, narrative or dialogue completion, role reversal, oral identification, description of familiar objects, and puppet shows.

Assessment of Reading Skills

Evaluation of reading skills in a foreign language classroom focuses on the learner's ability to comprehend written information in the target language. A great diversity in approaches used to assess foreign language reading skills has been explored, a sample of which is presented here. In a cloze test of writing and reading skills, students are presented with a reading passage that has been determined to be of average difficulty. In this passage, every 5th, 6th or 7th word has been deleted and replaced by a blank. The reader must write words in the blanks in the target language that make sense in the context of the passage (Oller, 1973; Valette, 1981; Curtain & Pesola, 1988). A form of "Computer Adaptive Testing" can use the cloze format to test reading and writing skills (Hawkins, 1987). "Skimming" post cards for specific information, or reading a brochure to "obtain information" and writing short answers are other examples of reading comprehension assessment techniques. (Linder & Valette, 1979).

Krashen and Terrell (1983) recommend the use of authentic materials in the target language for the purpose of assessment of reading skills. These materials include: signs and advertisements, newspapers and general interest nonfiction, pleasure reading of fiction, and academic reading and study.

Oller and Perkins (1980) provide an example of a "Reading Aloud" performance-based assessment, in which students read and record three paragraphs for the purpose of assessment of reading skills. Marva Barnett (1989) describes a test of reading skills composed of a reading activity followed by a different but related excerpt to which students must respond. Both excerpts are taken from authentic resources in the target language (1989, p.147-152). Carroll and Hall (1985) provide examples of picture-based "Reading Tests for Schoolchildren," that are appropriate for the early stages of language learning (1985, p.30-32). Omaggio (1986) suggests "Reading for Specific Details" in the context of "A schedule of flights to German cities" as a form of authentic assessment of reading skills.

An extension of reading skills assessment has also been developed in the form of "literary interpretation," which presupposes an "intermediate-high level of reading comprehension" on the ACTFL Reading Proficiency Scale (Henning, 1992) is also recorded.

Assessment of Writing Skills

Assessment of writing skills focuses on the learner's ability to write in the target language so that the intended message is grammatically and syntactically correct and clear. Diverse approaches to assessing foreign language writing abound. Assessment techniques for writing skills include students writing descriptive paragraphs about their observations of one or more people and "letter writing" (Mueller, 1987). Writing skills can be integrated with speaking when a holistic form of evaluation requires that students write, and perform dramatic performances.

Other foreign language educators propose particular authentic tasks for assessment of writing skills. Jarausch and Tufts (1988) have organized writing tasks that correspond to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 1986. Assessment techniques of writing skills include performance-based assessments of lists, dialogues, sentence completion, postcards, descriptions, journals, letters, "rewrites," narration, and giving directions. An "error matrix" coupled with a correction code "simplifies the evaluation of writing" for the evaluator, and establishes an "active-correction process" for the learner. Valette (1978) reports on an evaluation technique called "group compositions," where student members of small groups devise a rubric for evaluation of their group's compositions. Group rubrics are shared and discussed with the whole class and a class rubric is developed. The classroom teacher then employs the class-designed rubric in subsequent evaluations of students' writing skills.

Other tasks recommended as performance tasks to assess writing skills in the target language include filling out forms, writing personal/business letters, writing personal narratives, writing essays, and writing fiction or poetry (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and personal questions about school which a student would read and respond to in writing (Finocchiaro & Sako, 1983). Littlejohn (1990) demonstrates how a simulation can be used in the assessment of writing skills. In the situation, "An Export Order," students must communicate with window suppliers by writing in the target language. An Assessment Guide Sheet is used by the evaluator for this evaluation activity.

Self-assessment of writing skills can also be encouraged. Melton (1984) comments that the activity of journal-writing provides a "laboratory where the student can test ideas before bringing them into class discussions." In this way a learner can get personal feedback about their writing skills that can later be assimilated and incorporated into their speaking skills. Oskarsson (1980) reports on self-assessment of writing skills by means of formal tests consisting of open-ended questions and free production tasks for which sample answer models are provided.

Freeman and Freeman (1992) report on the adaptation of the "Primary Language Record" as a model for portfolios to use for writing assessment in bilingual education. Portfolio assessment includes interviews with students and parents. Observation of writing and reading in both the first and second language.

Assessment of Culture

The curriculum goals related to the knowledge of culture in the countries where the foreign language developed or is used are often assessed using traditional approaches such as multiple choice or essay examinations. Linder and Valette (1979) point out that the assessment of a learner's appreciation of a target culture can be seen in awareness of etiquette, knowledge of geographical facts, the ability to read and listen to media produced in the foreign language, and knowing how to interpret references to cultural facts and phenomena.

A variety of approaches to authentic assessment tasks for cultural awareness through foreign language are found in the literature. David Alley (1989) describes the use of songs in assessment of culture in the foreign language classroom as "the ideal marriage of poetry and music which provide the most authentic expression of the life of a people." A test of student comprehension and retention in the domain of cultural knowledge might be much like assessment of other areas of content. For example, a modified cloze test would present a song that was learned in the classroom with words missing from a recording of that song. Heusinkveld (1989) suggests that students' cultural sensitivity can be evaluated through the stimulus of photographs and advertisements. An evaluator could ask provocative questions while showing the learner particular examples and the learner's responses could be evaluated on specific criteria related to goals for cultural understanding. Hanley and Heron (1992) propose similar assessment approaches using video or text stimuli.

Summary of Assessment Issues in Foreign Languages

The integration of assessment and instruction can often be witnessed in foreign language classrooms through the various mechanisms described in this paper. The manner in which curriculum, instruction and assessment are combined and the relative emphasis on each varies by grade level. Songs, oral questions, dialogues or role plays seem to dominate the instructional period in K-6 classrooms (Curtain & Pesola, 1988, p. 183). In elementary school foreign language programs, class time is devoted to the development of listening, speaking and culture skills with few quizzes or tests being given. Many current developments in the area of foreign language assessment take place at the secondary level or university (Pino, 1988; Mueller, 1987; Jarausch & Tufts, 1988; Hill & Mosher, 1989; Fleak, 1992, where the enrollment in foreign language classes is most stable and the largest concentration of students exist (Joint National Committee for Languages, 1991; Prince, personal communication, November 4, 1992).

Performance assessment in foreign languages makes extensive use of a wide range of innovative tasks and scoring procedures. These assessment approaches are well established, field tested, and documented in foreign language while they are newly emerging in other curriculum areas. The assessment strategies provide well developed models which can be useful in other fields and disciplines and offer insight into the range of possibilities to consider when structuring multidimensional assessment systems. Educators interested in performance-based authentic assessment, and especially those interested in supporting whole-language approaches in language arts instruction, have much to gain from careful study of assessment in foreign language education.

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